

## SAINTE-BEUVE, CRITIC OF RONSARD

by Samuel M. Carrington

... son unique but à elle [la poésie] est de faire bien et à la satisfaction de tous, sa suprême loi est de plaire à elle-même et aux autres et ... si elle a quelques conditions techniques à remplir, ce doit être chemin faisant, sans qu'elle en paraisse ralentie dans sa marche, sans qu'elle en soit expressément occupée.

Published in 1825 in an unsigned review written for the liberal periodical, the *Globe*,<sup>1</sup> the preceding passage constitutes one of the earliest critical pronouncements by Charles Augustin de Sainte-Beuve on poetry and the requirements which it should fulfill. While the first part of the statement, Aristotelian in concept, falls partially within the general guidelines followed by the neo-Classical criticism still prevalent at that time, the concluding part with the implied priority given to lyricism over "established" technical rules represents somewhat of a departure from those guidelines. The statement is also to a certain extent at variance with the intellectual formation which the young critic had received in the rigid critical methods of the Boileau-La Harpe tradition.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, however, it must be remembered that the *Globe* in which the review appeared was in the vanguard of the nascent French Romantic movement and that Sainte-Beuve himself was beginning to temper the traditional training received from his master, Daunou, with ideas coming from this new movement.

Guided by the criteria enunciated in the statement of 1825 as well as by those of traditional criticism, Sainte-Beuve began in 1826 an extensive study of Renaissance French poetry, and with this syncretistic critical approach he was not only to revive interest in France's literary heritage of the sixteenth century, but was also to reintroduce on a limited scale Ronsard to its intelligentsia. The results of this study were originally destined for an essay to be submitted to a competition announced by the Académie Française on the subject: *Discours sur l'histoire de la langue et de la littérature françaises, depuis les commencements du XVI<sup>me</sup> siècle, jusqu'en 1610*. However, as the scope of the research broadened, Sainte-Beuve abandoned the idea of entering the contest and published instead in July 1828 the *Tableau historique et critique*

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*de la poésie française et du théâtre français au XVI<sup>me</sup> siècle*,<sup>3</sup> which had appeared earlier in serial form in the *Globe* (two of the eleven articles are devoted exclusively to Ronsard) between July 7, 1827 and April 30, 1828.<sup>4</sup>

While the structure and factual material in the articles are reproduced substantively in the *Tableau*, the critical appreciation in the two varies a great deal. Initially, Sainte-Beuve judged the poetic activity of Ronsard and his colleagues to be cold, monotonous imitations of classical authors and Italian poets.<sup>5</sup> Compared to the soundness of Malherbe's theories on poetry, the ideas set forth in Du Bellay's *Deffence et illustration* lacked for the critic imagination and were impractical in their application. This unfavorable attitude is also reflected in other, non-related articles by him appearing in the *Globe* in 1827. In a review of a bilingual edition of Anacreon's odes, the natural grace of Marot's lyricism and poetic language are praised over the servile imitations and linguistic "innovation[s] grecque[s] et latine[s]" of Ronsard and Du Bellay. Described as having consecrated themselves "superstitieusement au culte de l'antiquité," the latter are also reproached for having repudiated "l'humble patrimoine de l'ancienne poésie nationale."<sup>6</sup> The critic's literary nationalism reappears in an article on La Fontaine where the fabulist's "esprit léger, moqueur, grivois," which Sainte-Beuve considered to be an innate part of the French national character, is preferred to the "prétentions tragiques, épiques et pindariques" of the *Pléiade*.<sup>7</sup>

During the interval between the appearance of the above critical comments and the publication of the *Tableau*, the opinions of Sainte-Beuve vis-à-vis Ronsard became more favorable. Although the same syncretistic approach continued to an extent to guide him in his appreciations, certain modifications in his critical method are discernible, especially in the later articles on sixteenth-century poetry. The provisional rejection of restraints imposed by conventions as well as an affirmation of the doctrine of mimesis are more explicitly stated; and, obviously spurred on by the ever increasing influence coming from his association with Victor Hugo,<sup>8</sup> Sainte-Beuve introduced into his critical method the idea of historical relativity in order to explain and thereby to justify the esthetics of the Vendômois. Nevertheless, the classical orientation received in his youth was not abandoned, but rather it provided him with the intellectual discipline evident in the analytical perspective of his evaluations.<sup>9</sup>

It is from this new optic that there appeared in the *Tableau* a revamping of the earlier judgments made on the poetry of Ronsard. Beginning with the first pages of the work, one is struck by the fact that the section on poetry is not just a critical, historical description and analysis of Renaissance poetry, but rather that its focal point is the literary production of the *Pléiade*, especially that of Ronsard. Referring to the "école de Ronsard" and recognizing his complete break with the Middle Ages, Sainte-Beuve speaks of the Vendômois as "le grand artisan de la réforme poétique" while discussing the ideas

and verses of Du Bellay.<sup>10</sup> The primacy given to Ronsard, whose ascendancy is compared to that of Voltaire, is once again emphasized at the beginning of the treatment proper of the poet: "Ce fameux Ronsard, en effet, dont nous avons à parler maintenant, exerça sur la littérature et la poésie, du moment qu'il parut, une souveraineté immense qui, durant cinquante années, ne souffrit ni adversaires ni rivaux." From this point Sainte-Beuve gives "le spectacle impartial de son étonnante destinée littéraire"<sup>11</sup> in which the biographical information and critical judgments of the poet's contemporaries are drawn largely from the *Vie de Pierre de Ronsard*, written by the Vendômois' literary executor, Claude Binet.<sup>12</sup>

After describing the decline in popularity of Ronsard and commenting on the condemnations of Malherbe,<sup>13</sup> Sainte-Beuve begins a partial rehabilitation of the poet in which the doctrine of historical relativity is invoked:

*Toute grande célébrité dans les lettres a sa raison, bonne ou mauvaise, qui la motive . . . et la justifie du moins de l'absurdité: c'est un devoir d'en tenir compte et de comprendre avant de sévir. . . . Ce poète, qu'on flétrit de ridicule pour avoir cru trop aisément à son immortalité, n'y a cru que sur la foi de tout son siècle. . . . Son erreur n'a pas été une duperie naïve: elle mérite bien qu'on l'éclaircisse, et qu'on en trouve, s'il est possible, une interprétation moins amère.<sup>14</sup>*

With the emergence of French as a national and a literary language in the first half of the sixteenth century, there was according to the critic an *a priori* need to equal in literature the standards of excellence found in the poets and thinkers of antiquity—a need which Ronsard felt and answered. No longer is the poet the servile imitator of classical authors, and the word "imitation" assumes the meaning of not just a copy of an original but rather a model upon which the artist has placed his own interpretation:

*Admirateur des anciens avec une certaine indépendance d'esprit, au lieu de les traduire, il les imita: toute son originalité, toute son audace, est d'avoir innové cette imitation. . . . il déploya dans ces cadres d'emprunts [i.e., sonnets, odes, elegies, etc.] une verve assez animée pour qu'on lui sût alors un gré infini. C'était la première fois que la physionomie du passé semblait revivre dans notre idiome vulgaire. . . .<sup>15</sup>*

For his reader to understand better Ronsard's verses, the critic discusses his poetic language which possesses a certain degree of majesty. Although he finds some expressions and metaphors in Ronsard's loftier poetry which "fait grimacer ce style qui veut être sérieux," Sainte-Beuve defends the use of anachronisms and tries to explain away such expressions as the "perruque de Jupiter" by suggesting that the vocabulary of the sixteenth century should be appreciated according to the meanings of words at that time and not according to their modern signification: ". . . il faut convenir qu'en semblable matière chaque siècle est un juge aussi compétent de ses propres goûts que la postérité."<sup>16</sup> Sainte-Beuve concludes that, while creating a rich vocabulary with restraint, Ronsard was also forging a literary-erudite-court language

which might have become that of the court of Louis XIV had not historical events intervened.

After the question of linguistics has been fully explored, the analysis proper of the poetry is undertaken. In contrast to the spirited defense of Ronsard's poetic language, the appreciations of the esthetic merits of his verses are understated almost to the point of timidity. For the critic two "Ronsards-poet" emerge: one who is dominated by a method and the other, "encore naïf et déjà brillant, qui continua, perfectionna Marot, dévança et surpassa de bien loin Malherbe. . . ."<sup>17</sup> The first of these two personalities is the composer of lofty poems; however, the critic's scorn of the preceding year of the "prétentions pindariques" has been replaced by an attempt to explain the poet's goal in this realm without giving a categorical evaluation. Stating that Ronsard understood "la haute poésie" and that occasionally " . . . il n'a pas toujours été malheureux dans ses hardiesses généreuses," Sainte-Beuve concludes that " . . . sous les entraves qui le resserrent, il sent lui-même l'impuissance de s'élancer où une voix secrète l'appelle, et plus d'une fois il en gémit avec une sincérité de tristesse qui n'appartient qu'au vrai talent."<sup>18</sup>

It is however the Ronsard "naïf et . . . brillant," the poet who excelled in the lighter lyrical genres, whom Sainte-Beuve admires the most. In this regard Marot is no longer equal or superior to the Pléiade in poetic expression. Invoking the idea of progress, the critic cites the poems "Mignonne, allons voir" and "Or' que l'hiver roidit" as examples of a brilliance which later would belong only to La Fontaine and as poems which surpass in beauty Marot's poetic language.<sup>19</sup>

An equally notable change in Sainte-Beuve's appreciation concerns his attitude toward the literary influence of the authors of antiquity, and he becomes the first modern critic to recognize that much of Ronsard's (and the Pléiade's) originality is based on an imitation of classical authors and that this imitation, innovative in character, focuses on the substance rather than the form of the models. No longer considered to be the servile imitator, Ronsard is lauded for maintaining his intellectual integrity while borrowing from his classical heritage: " . . . au lieu de les traduire, il les imita; toute son originalité, toute son audace, est d'avoir innové cette imitation. . . . C'était la première fois que la physionomie du passé semblait revivre dans notre idiome vulgaire . . ."<sup>20</sup>

In his concluding remarks, Sainte-Beuve pays tribute to Ronsard's contributions to French versification: the alternating of masculine and feminine rhymes, rehabilitation with Du Bellay of the alexandrin, the creation of a poetic language which Desportes would polish and refine, etc.<sup>21</sup> At the same time the critic regrets the suppression by Malherbe of many of the Vendômois' lyric rhythms, and it is through this variety of rhythms that he suggests a lineal relationship between the Pléiade and the young Romantic poets of his day ("l'école nouvelle").<sup>22</sup>

While the *Tableau* remains for all practical purposes Sainte-Beuve's definitive treatment of Ronsard, several critical judgments appear in later years which complement the appreciations found in the *Tableau* and which often serve also as an apology for Hugo and his colleagues. In the *Portrait littéraire* of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (1836), he regrets the disappearance under the influence of Malherbe of the descriptive lyricism of nature to be found in the verses of Marot and Ronsard.<sup>23</sup> On several occasions he speaks admiringly of the "littérature païenne, grecque, épicurienne de Ronsard"<sup>24</sup> and contends that a truly revolutionary poetic movement was proclaimed by Ronsard and Du Bellay.<sup>25</sup>

It is only when Sainte-Beuve assumes the role of apologist of Romantic poetry that he vacillates between his 1827 and 1828 positions on Ronsard's imitation. In a "Prospectus pour les œuvres de Victor Hugo" which dates around 1829, he attributes the creation of the "French" ode to Hugo rather than to Ronsard, who

... n'avait fait en ce genre que des études dignes d'estime, mais assez malheureuses ... [car il] s'est fourvoyé ... dans la vieille mythologie et dans l'erudition pindarique. Victor Hugo, le premier peut-être depuis Pindare, et précisément parce qu'il n'a songé nullement à l'imiter, a conçu l'ode dans toute sa naïveté et dans toute sa splendeur. ...<sup>26</sup>

Once again "imitation" has been given a pejorative connotation; yet it is noteworthy that the critic refrains from asserting that Hugo-poet is superior to Ronsard-poet. A condemnation of imitations appears also in "Des Soirées littéraires ou les poètes entre eux" (1831) where the poetry of the Pléiade is judged to be artificial and loaded with borrowings; still, he correctly concedes that "... cette ligne poétique, qui, bien qu'elle ait échoué dans son objet principal, a eu tant d'influence sur l'établissement de notre littérature classique."<sup>27</sup>

The value of Sainte-Beuve's study of Ronsard has been greeted with a diversity of opinions. Léon Séché contends that he exaggerated the role and influence of Ronsard over his colleagues of the Pléiade,<sup>28</sup> while Gustave Charlier states that "Nul n'ignore avec quel éclat et quel succès Sainte-Beuve a réhabilité Ronsard ... [et] vengeait brillamment le chantre de Cassandre. ..."<sup>29</sup> More recently, comparing the *Tableau* to modern studies, R. A. Katz has termed part of the critic's defense of Ronsard as faint-hearted.<sup>30</sup> Whatever may be the validity of these opinions, one must, in order to assess fully studies of Sainte-Beuve's contributions, consider the critical principles guiding the critic, the evaluations made and, finally, the historical context in which they were made.

As a critic, especially in the *Tableau*, Sainte-Beuve saw his primary role to be that of guide and unobtrusive interpreter. In an explanatory note to the text of three *ballades* by Villon, for example, he apologetically asks for the reader's indulgence and objectivity: "Malgré les difficultés et les obscurités du texte, nous nous hasardons à citer ces trois ballades, en priant



le lecteur de ne les juger qu'après les avoir bien comprises, ou du moins à peu près bien."<sup>31</sup> As is true in his treatment of Ronsard, which is in essence a *portrait littéraire*, Sainte-Beuve often placed a given poet in his historical context and gave a rapid description of a work—analyzing the content and pointing out interesting (for his reader) characteristics—along with the judgments and commentaries of the poet's contemporaries. Of particular interest were questions of form and language, especially as they pertained to a general theory being applied to a work under consideration. Michaut has pointed out that the works in the *Tableau* "... n'y sont point examinées pour ce qu'elles expriment, mais uniquement pour la façon dont elles l'expriment; les auteurs n'y sont point des hommes, ils ne sont même point des esprits, ils sont uniquement des artistes, des créateurs ou des imitateurs de formes."<sup>32</sup> Sainte-Beuve confirms this observation when he states in the *Nouveaux Lundis* that "... la production littéraire n'est point distincte ou du moins séparable du reste de l'homme et de l'organisation."<sup>33</sup> As a result of this approach to literary analysis, tempered by his classical intellectual formation, Sainte-Beuve offered a judicious, informed, explanatory objectivity which permitted his reader to make his own appreciation. Finally, whatever subjective criticism did appear was often restricted to an evaluation and a refutation of unfavorable comments made by the poet's contemporaries, such as those by Malherbe about Ronsard.

Relying on this method, Sainte-Beuve attempted only a *partial* rehabilitation of Ronsard's literary reputation. Refuting the harsh judgments of Malherbe, he considered the poet's esthetic achievement to be found in his cultivation of form, which permitted him to conclude that the Vendômois was not of a poet of *génie* but rather one of *talent* spurred on by erudition. Although he recognized the poet's goals in the composition of lofty poetry and generally understood the Pléiade's doctrines of imitation and mimesis, he was particularly interested in and applauded his lyrical expression in the lighter genres.<sup>34</sup> In this regard, Sainte-Beuve was by necessity primarily concerned with the doctrine of linguistic relativity in order to render more pertinent and to justify Ronsard's poetic language to the nineteenth-century reader.

In light of studies by such *Ronsardistes* as Paul Laumonier, Isidore Silver and Raymond Lebègue, Sainte-Beuve's study of Ronsard must be deemed at best timid and one-sided in its approach to the man and the poet, for almost completely neglected is the important question of the latter's intellectualism and how he sought throughout his career to achieve that elusive harmony between form and content. However, as the critic was to state twenty-five years later in a marginal notation of Gandar's *Ronsard considéré comme imitateur d'Homère et de Pindare* (Metz, 1854), the representation of the Vendômois in the *Tableau* and elsewhere was destined to be an "acte de goût" rather than a comprehensive, erudite study.<sup>35</sup>

Yet, in this timidity and cautiousness, Sainte-Beuve showed in the decade of the 1820's, when waning neo-Classicism still exercised a certain tyranny over literary tastes, an audacity which was at great variance with the critical comments of most of his contemporaries. In a letter to the Ronsard editor, Prosper Blanchemain, on January 6, 1867, he humbly wrote that "Je n'ai d'autre mérite que d'avoir devancé ce que d'autres ont mieux vu et plus en détail. J'ai dû paraître bien timide aux survenants. Ce fut une audace alors."<sup>36</sup> Although he failed to recognize the genius of the Vendômois, Sainte-Beuve was instrumental in placing in proper perspective his contributions to the development and the evolution of French versification in an age which considered the Pléiade to be little more than a survival of the Middle Ages. At the same time, Sainte-Beuve reminded his readers of their rich heritage of literature earlier than the seventeenth century and prepared the way for Romantic lyricism and the reappearance of old verse forms by the Parnassians.<sup>37</sup> Finally, he was responsible, more than any of his contemporaries,<sup>38</sup> for the revival in Ronsard and, in general, sixteenth-century studies and editions which were to appear during the second half of the century and which were to pave the way for critics to accord to the Vendômois the title of "Prince of Poets" and his rightful place in the annals of French poetry.<sup>39</sup>

## NOTES

1. "La Calédonie ou la guerre nationale . . .," *Globe*, I (March 26, 1825), 427.

2. A. G. Lehmann, *Sainte-Beuve* (Oxford, 1962), p. 26.

3. Concerning the several editions of this study, see G. Michaut, *Sainte-Beuve avant les "Lundis"* (Paris, 1903), p. 603. The editions of 1828 and 1838, both published in Paris, contain two volumes, the second of which is an anthology of the *Œuvres choisies de Pierre de Ronsard*.

4. *Poésie française au XVI<sup>me</sup> siècle. Ronsard. Sa destinée littéraire. Caractère de son talent et de ses œuvres*. [*Globe*, V (Oct. 4, 1827), 418] and *Succès de Ronsard dans l'ode anacréontique. Sentiment profond qu'il avait de la haute poésie. Ses réformes de versification et d'orthographe* [ibid. (Oct. 12, 1827), 439]. See also the list of related articles in Michaut, pp. 600-602.

On the role played by Sainte-Beuve in the nineteenth century in rehabilitating sixteenth-century poets, see V.-L. Saulnier, "La Réputation de Ronsard au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle et le rôle de Sainte-Beuve," *Revue universitaire*, LIV (1947), 92-97; and R. A. Katz, *Ronsard's French Critics: 1585-1828* (Geneva, 1966), ch. v. There are also scattered comments on Ronsard by Sainte-Beuve in articles and correspondence which date after 1828, but they add little to the judgments made in the *Tableau*.

5. See *Globe*, V (Nov. 8, 1827), 497 ff.

6. *Globe*, IV (Mar. 1, 1827), 455, republished in Sainte-Beuve, *Pr. Lundis in Œuvres*, Maxime Leroy, ed., 2 vols. [Bibl. de la Pléiade] (Paris, 1956-1960), I, 218.

7. *Globe*, V (Sept. 15, 1827), 374 ff. See *Portraits littéraires, Œuvres*, ed. Leroy, I, 700.

8. Michaut, pp. 135-136.

9. On Sainte-Beuve's evolution as a critic during this period, see *ibid.*, ch. v.
10. *Tableau historique et critique de la poésie française . . .*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1828), I, 70.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
12. Claude Binet, *La Vie de Pierre de Ronsard*, éd. Laumonier (Paris, 1910).
13. *Tableau*, I, 86-87.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 87-88.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 96 and 131.
22. Sainte-Beuve would later carry the analogy further in a dedication to Hugo of an in-folio edition of Ronsard's poetry:  

Au plus grand inventeur lyrique  
 que la poésie française ait eu depuis Ronsard,  
 le très humble commentateur de Ronsard.

S.-B.
- Cited in Léon Séché, *Sainte-Beuve*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1904), I, 100.
23. Sainte-Beuve, *Œuvres*, éd. Leroy, II, 101.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 11; see also *ibid.*, p. 585. The statement was made in 1835.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 334. The comment dates from 1842.
26. *Ibid.*, I, 298.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 1039.
28. Séché, I, 82.
29. Gustave Charlier, "Ronsard au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle avant Sainte-Beuve," *Revue des Cours et Conférences*, XLI, 1 (1940), 69.
30. Katz, p. 14.
31. *Tableau*, I, 9-10, n. 3.
32. Michaut, p. 163.
33. Sainte-Beuve, *Nouveaux Lundis*, 14 vols. (Paris, 1863-1870), III, 15.
34. See above n. 22 and the accolade given to Hugo.
35. Cited in H. Franchet, "Sainte-Beuve et Ronsard," *Rev. d'hist. litt.*, XXXI (1924), 439.
36. Sainte-Beuve, *Correspondance générale*, recueillie . . . par Jean Bonnerot, 16 vols. (Paris, 1935-1970), XVI, 40-41. See also the citation in Franchet, p. 439.
37. On this question see Harold Nicolson, *Sainte-Beuve* (Garden City, 1956), pp. 12-13.
38. On the critical comments of Sainte-Beuve's contemporaries, see Katz, ch. v.
39. See the tribute paid to Sainte-Beuve by Blanchemain in *Correspondance générale*, XVI, 236-237. The letter is dated May 15, 1867 and states "Je me trouvais soudain transporté par vous [Sainte-Beuve] dans un monde nouveau. . . . Vous m'avez fait connaître, vous m'avez fait aimer cet illustre déchu [Ronsard]." The editor then attributes to Sainte-Beuve the priority for having rediscovered and re-introduced the Vendômois to French poets.